

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous

Individual

Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Across these roles, I've seen firsthand the extraordinary cultural, social and economic value these organisations create for communities and the broader Australian public, as well as the increasing and almost untenable pressure many are under simply to remain operational.

Aboriginal art and culture centres are often officially recognised primarily in terms of the artwork they produce. While artistic outcomes are internationally significant, this framing overlooks the much broader role centres play within community life. In many remote communities, art centres support language and cultural maintenance, intergenerational knowledge transfer, caring for Country, local employment, community wellbeing, youth engagement and support for Elders. They are places where cultural authority, community leadership and economic participation intersect in practical everyday ways.

At the same time, many centres are operating within funding and policy settings that do not adequately reflect the reality of the work being asked of them.

Remote art centres are expected to operate as professional arts organisations, employers, cultural institutions, tourism destinations, community hubs and social service providers, often with very limited operational funding and tiny staffing structures. Currently, the only stable ongoing operational funding available is through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) program administered by the Federal Government. IVAIS funding is primarily designed to support the production, promotion and sale of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. In most cases, however, it represents only a small proportion of an art centre's annual budget and often covers little more than one senior staff salary and minimum wages for a very small number of local arts workers.

Managers and arts workers are constantly balancing governance, compliance, freight, staffing shortages, infrastructure issues, crisis response, remote travel logistics and community obligations alongside core artistic and cultural programming.

These pressures are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Across the sector there are urgent concerns around workforce burnout, staff funding and housing shortages, ageing infrastructure, rising freight and operational costs, insurance accessibility, and climate-related disruption including flooding, cyclones and extreme weather events. In some regions, centres are already experiencing prolonged closures and operational instability due to environmental conditions outside their control.

These challenges cannot be solved through patchwork short-term project funding alone. Increasingly, centres are forced to direct much of their time and energy into securing and acquitting project grants simply to keep their doors open. What is needed is long-term investment in the core operational sustainability of the sector.

Future cultural policy must recognise Aboriginal art and culture centres as essential cultural infrastructure. This means recognising the foundational role these organisations play in sustaining living culture, language, wellbeing and regional economies.

The new National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to properly recognise this work and create the conditions for the sector not only to survive, but to remain strong for future generations.